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ABSTRACT

Noting that parents' use of corporal punishment to discipline their children remains a strongly debated issue, this paper examines the impact of corporal punishment on children's development, focusing primarily on its long-term effectiveness. The paper presents the history of spanking in the United States, including public opinion on corporal punishment, the declining practice of spanking in schools, and parents' reasons for spanking. Arguments presented against corporal punishment include sending children mixed messages about social behavior, increasing children's deviant or antisocial behavior, increasing violence and aggression, increasing cruelty to animals, increasing the probability of spousal abuse, and contributing to psychological problems such as depression, drug addiction, and anxiety. Arguments in favor of the use of corporal punishment focus on differentiating its effective use from harmful use, presenting research findings that a fair amount of corporal punishment (a light spanking less than once a week) did not affect children's adjustment negatively; findings regarding the contribution of parents' beliefs about spanking and their emotions to the practice; and methodological concerns about anti-corporal punishment studies. Guidelines for administering corporal punishment are presented. The paper asserts that there may be a middle ground where reasonable conclusions can be made about the use of corporal punishment. The paper further notes that there is too much conflicting evidence to outlaw corporal punishment completely but there is evidence that some forms of corporal punishment are inappropriate and should not be used to discipline children. Therefore, it is important for professionals to educate parents on when and how corporal punishment can be used most effectively. (Contains 37 references.) (KB)

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Corporal Punishment: Does it hinder the development of children?

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Abstract

Corporal Punishment: Does it hinder the development of children?

The debate over the effectiveness of corporal punishment has become a very interesting topic in modern psychology. Many studies have been done on its effectiveness and to find out if it is even necessary (McCord, 1996; Larzelere, 1986). Many psychologists believe that physical discipline should never be used (Harris, 1998; Straus, 1994). They argue that it only causes children to become aggressive and does not teach them how to handle problems properly. People of the opposing view feel that when used appropriately, corporal punishment can be an effective tool for teaching children right from wrong. Two major conflicts in this issue are how to determine when corporal punishment is necessary and how to draw the line between corporal punishment and child abuse.

America's teenagers are becoming more and more violent. A dramatic increase in school violence has many people searching for an answer as to why these children are resorting to so much violence. Fingers are being pointed at everything from too much violence on television and video games to a decrease in the beliefs of organized religion. Others believe it starts in the home and that corporal punishment is to blame. My research will

show why people argue against the use of corporal punishment and why their opponents believe they are wrong.

Introduction

Parents' use of corporal punishment to discipline children is a strongly debated issue in modern psychology. There are opposing views on the effectiveness of corporal punishment, and research is being done to find out if it has negative side effects on the development of children. Psychologists have many arguments against the use of corporal punishment. The most used argument against corporal punishment is that it will cause children to learn aggressive behavior, thereby reducing their skills for social interaction (Harris, 1998). This is the theory that drives most of the psychological experiments on corporal punishment. Advocates against corporal punishment also believe that it puts the bond between parent and child in serious jeopardy (Redd, Morris, & Martin, 1975). This argument comes from the idea that when children are spanked they become afraid of their parents and this fear may not allow them to fully open up and be honest.

Anyone who does not believe in the use of corporal punishment will argue that there are other ways to bring about better discipline and respect than by spanking (Hyman, 1997). Other claims against corporal punishment include that it may lead to child abuse, that these children are more likely to commit spousal abuse and sexual deviance later in life, that it is not effective and that it may be psychologically damaging.

However, these are all very complex social situations, which have many contributing factors and are easily refutable by people who believe corporal punishment is an effective tool for disciplining children.

Critics of corporal punishment feel that the right kind of corporal punishment is effective and often necessary. They do not deny the notion that excessive corporal punishment is harmful but they do not believe this is enough reason to ban the use of corporal punishment altogether. A major argument for corporal punishment is that every parent has the right to spank his/her child if it is appropriate and not too excessive. Research shows that a vast majority of parents in the United States report spanking their children, and almost half of the states still use spanking in their schools (Kennedy, 1995). Straus (1977; 1994) estimated that only 3% - 10% of children in the United States have not been physically punished at some time in their lives (as cited in Rohner & Bourque, 1996).

With so many parents using corporal punishment, even as popular opinion has begun to move against it, there seems to be a natural instinct for a parent to sometimes spank a child. Those who believe in corporal punishment feel that no amount of research can undermine parents' right to act on their instincts. Advocates for corporal punishment refute bold statements about the negative effects of spanking by arguing that laboratory

experiments can not control all influences on such things as aggression, sexual deviance, and psychological problems. These advocates believe there is not enough proof to support the total abolishment of corporal punishment. People who believe corporal punishment is not immoral take a more reasonable position that when corporal punishment is used appropriately it is effective, but when it is too excessive it can become abusive.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an in-depth look at whether or not corporal punishment really does hinder the development of children. As professionals learn more about corporal punishment, they can better educate parents on how to discipline their children in ways that will not cause negative side effects.

In reality, both sides have difficulty substantiating their views. One side may never be considered totally right or wrong because there are so many obstacles in determining the true nature of corporal punishment. One of the biggest problems is determining how much physical discipline is too much, before it becomes child abuse. The psychological and legal definition of corporal punishment and child abuse are so closely related that they could be argued to be the same act. Corporal punishment is said to be a "purposeful indication of pain on the human body as penalty for an offense" (Hyman, 1997, p.9). Similarly, child abuse is defined as occurring when someone physically harms a

child and proof is seen by marks on the body, such as cuts and bruises (Hyman, 1997). Each definition implies the use of pain. The only distinction is that corporal punishment is used in response to an offense and does not include the notion of actually harming the child. This is where the true conflict occurs. If a mother slaps her two year old son on the behind for running into the street and there is a visible welt, can she be convicted of child abuse? Advocates against corporal punishment say yes. They argue that any time a parent hits a child, then the parent is committing child abuse. This position is very extreme and it is criticized for taking the negative effects of corporal punishment too far.

Another conflict in debating the use of corporal punishment comes when trying to determine if it is effective in the long run. Everyone agrees that spanking children will generally stop them from the current misbehavior, but the question is whether they stopped because they have learned an alternate behavior or simply fear being spanked again. This is a difficult question to answer because much of it has to do with the parenting style of each parent. If the parent explains to the child why s/he is being spanked and teaches an alternate behavior, then there is a good chance the child will learn from the experience and the misbehavior will not continue. However, if the parent spanks the child out of anger or fear, without discussing why the child is

being punished, then that child will only stop the behavior for fear of being spanked again. Experimenters have to consider things like how the parent uses corporal punishment each time and what determines grounds for its use. Like many other aspects of conducting experiments about corporal punishment, these factors make it very difficult to determine the long-term effectiveness of corporal punishment.

The most widely researched and controversial aspect of the corporal punishment debate questions if spanking children causes them to become aggressive. Many people feel that by hitting children parents are sending them the wrong message. Again, much of this has to do with each particular parent and how s/he use corporal punishment. Things like genetics, interaction with peers, television exposure, family structure, and all other influences in the development of a child can not be monitored in a laboratory. In short, there are numerous other factors that may contribute to the development of aggression.

The popularity of corporal punishment's link to aggression has become one of the most publicized issues in the debate (Davis, 1999). Much of this can be attributed to a national concern for why there has been such a dramatic increase in child and teen violence. It seems that every week there are news headlines detailing violent acts by youths. The most devastating may have been the slaughter in Columbine, Colorado's

high school. Other recent acts of violence include the riots in Los Angeles after the Lakers won the playoffs in June of 2000 and the group of kids who attacked so many women at a parade through Central Park in New York during the same month. With this growing tension in America everyone feels there is a need to "fix" America's youth. Fingers are being pointed in every direction and there are many theories as to the cause of this problem. Some people blame it on too much violence on television and video games. Others feel that violence has been caused by a decrease in the beliefs of organized religion. There will always be those who believe it starts in the home, which brings us back to corporal punishment.

Psychologists, being the experts on human behavior, feel the pressure to find an answer and are doing many experiments in hopes of coming to a final conclusion. Murray A. Straus (e.g., 1977, 1991) has done many experiments on the effects of corporal punishment and the idea that it causes aggression in children. He is a strong advocate against the use of corporal punishment and believes effective parenting is possible without ever spanking a child. Straus's main argument in defense of his theory is that when children are spanked by their parents, they are learning that hitting is an effective way to deal with problems and that it is alright to hit people when you are angry with them. Similar findings have many Americans up in arms

against the use of corporal punishment, and there are many that believe the act should be outlawed. For something that has been used as a form of punishment for so long, it is interesting that corporal punishment has only been questioned over the last few decades. Has society changed so much as to outlaw one of its oldest parenting practices?

History

Parents have been spanking their children for as long as people can remember. Before the 1960's, it was socially acceptable for parents to discipline children however they wanted (Rosellini & Mulrine, 1998). Corporal punishment was also practiced in schools all over the United States. As the civil rights movement gained strength through the 1960's and 1970's, people became more considerate of everyone's rights, including children. Professionals began to question the use of corporal punishment and experiments were done to determine its effectiveness and possible side effects. Some of the experiments found that corporal punishment caused aggression and psychological problems in children (Larzelere, 1986; Straus, 1991).

Public opinion on corporal punishment then began to sway in opposition to the act. A good example of this is the Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter (1999). The letter shows the results of a national survey done by the

Children's Institute International. The survey revealed that 82 percent of adults were spanked by their parents when they were children, but, only 55 percent think it is necessary in disciplining their own children.

The effort to eliminate corporal punishment has professionals asking why parents decide to spank their children. A study by Holden, Miller and Harris (1999) involved questioning 42 mothers and 42 fathers to find out why and how often they use corporal punishment. Participants were asked to fill out a Parental Responses to Child Misbehavior questionnaire (Holden et al., 1995) and then had to respond to different situations involving child misbehavior. The results showed that there are two kinds of spankers. There are those who use it as an instrumental tool for disciplining children and those who spank when a child's behavior makes them very emotional. An example of an emotional spanker is a parent who does not normally resort to corporal punishment unless his/her child does something which frightens or infuriates the parent. Overall, most parents use corporal punishment because they believe it will lead to better behavior and will increase a child's respect for parental authority.

Similar beliefs of most parents do not seem to translate outside of their homes. The use of corporal punishment has drastically decreased in the school system (Hyman, 1998). The

first year that corporal punishment's use in schools was debated was in 1976 when two states announced that they would no longer allow corporal punishment in their schools. This sparked the debate to a new level and since then, 27 states have also banned the use of corporal punishment in schools (Hyman, 1998). Now, the movement against corporal punishment has gone even further. Not only do advocates want to ban its use in schools but they also want to outlaw parents' right to spank their children in the home as well.

Arguments Against Corporal Punishment

Professionals against the use of corporal punishment believe it has negative effects on many aspects of child development. Not only do they believe in corporal punishment's negative consequences, but they also do not see it as an effective form of discipline. There is some speculation that in using corporal punishment, parents are sending their children a mixed message. As a result, the child may be left confused on how to behave socially. It is known from social learning theory that violence is a learned behavior (Bandura, 1977). This supports the main argument of almost every claim against corporal punishment. Based on the assumption that children see their parents as good, what happens to a child's thought process when a parent gives pain for punishment? The child will learn that it is sometimes acceptable, even necessary, to give pain to

control others (McCord, 1996). This reasoning is very hard for advocates of corporal punishment to refute.

The effectiveness of corporal punishment is called into question by the assumption that it causes children to become more deviant than if it were never used at all (Dadds, 1987). In fact, one model of antisocial child behavior shows poor discipline as the first step in the development of such behavior (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). Without correct discipline, a child will not learn correct behavior.

In order for psychologists to prove that physical discipline actually causes children to misbehave, they must show a direct correlation between a parent's use of corporal punishment and a child's continuing misbehavior. A study by Brenner and Fox (1998) attempted to show the correlation between discipline and behavior. The participant sample involved 1,056 mothers of children ages 1-5. A modified version of the Parent Behavior Checklist (PBC; Fox, 1994) used a four-point scale to measure three things: (a) the mother's expectations for the child's development, (b) the mother's frequency and specifications for using verbal and corporal punishment, and (c) the mother's use of nurturing the child's psychological development. Using a version of the Behavior Screening Questionnaire (BSQ; Richman & Graham, 1971) the mothers were then asked to score their children's behavior problems. A four-

point scale was again used to rate the frequency of nine problem behaviors. After analyzing the data, Brenner and Fox noticed that parents who used corporal punishment the most had more behavior problems with their children than those who used the least amount of corporal punishment.

These findings support the results of a previous study done by Murray Straus in 1997. Known as the leading professional in the movement against the use of corporal punishment, Straus was interested in studying the effects of corporal punishment on antisocial behavior in children. At the start of the study, Straus felt it was necessary to determine the level of antisocial behavior in each child so that he could see if there was a significant increase over time. Interviews from 807 mothers about their children's current behavior were used with reports of the mothers' frequent use of corporal punishment. The mothers were interviewed again two years later; they revealed that antisocial behavior had increased with continued corporal punishment. Straus' conclusions are the same as from the Brenner and Fox study in 1998. Corporal punishment used to reduce antisocial behavior has the opposite effect from what is intended.

Among the problems that go along with antisocial behavior, corporal punishment is often blamed for increasing violence and aggression as well. Murray Straus has published several

articles on the theory that corporal punishment causes violence and aggression. In an extensive study done by Straus in 1996, he concluded that the more corporal punishment a child experiences, the more likely s/he will become violent towards others. Straus recalls an experiment when he interviewed 270 college students about their responses to being spanked. The most used response they could remember was anger and rage. Straus hypothesized that this anger from corporal punishment opens the doorway into violence towards society.

A very interesting and unique experiment by Flynn (1999) explored the relationship of corporal punishment to aggression by studying corporal punishment and animal abuse. The study is unique because it shows a link between children's cruelty to animals and violence towards others later in life. The theory in Flynn's experiment is that children who are cruel to animals have a lack of empathy, which could result in acts of violence against humanity. Flynn used 267-college students who were asked to complete an 18-page questionnaire. The participants were asked very detailed questions regarding their history of being spanked and their history of cruelty to animals. Similar to the experiments mentioned previously, Flynn found that higher frequencies of spanking resulted in more frequent incidents of violence and cruelty towards animals.

The violence caused by corporal punishment has also been studied in spousal abuse. This comes from the theory that violence teaches violence, so that children who are spanked will grow up believing it is acceptable to hit the ones you love when they make you angry. This makes it easy to see how the negative consequences of corporal punishment continue to grow as children become adults. In 1996, Straus and Yodanis collected data on 4,401 couples from a national family violence survey. The survey reported social learning, depression, and conflict resolution skills of men and women. Straus and Yodanis concluded that since so many families use corporal punishment and so many families experience spousal abuse, to reduce the use of corporal punishment would reduce some of the factors contributing to spousal abuse.

The link between corporal punishment and spousal abuse is detailed even more in a study by Swinford, Demaris, Cernkovich, and Giordano (2000). They tested the relationship between corporal punishment, to increased deviant acts, to spousal abuse. A longitudinal study interviewed 940 adolescents in 1982 to report their frequency of committing deviant acts. Then, from 1992-1993, 608 participants from the 1982 interview were interviewed again. In order to be included in the second interview, participants had to be currently involved in a relationship of twelve months or longer. Using Straus's

Conflict Tactics Scale (1979), ten acts of violence between the participant and his/her partner over the past 12 months were measured by what the participant did and what was done to the participant. The 1992-1993 participants were then asked about the severity of punishment they received in adolescence and a measurement of various deviant actions was taken. The results supported the original hypothesis: Physical punishment in childhood contributed to deviant behavior in adolescence and is a predictor of intimate violence in adulthood.

With corporal punishment being blamed for so many faults in child development, it is easy for professionals to argue that corporal punishment contributes to many psychological problems in children. Some professionals believe that corporal punishment in adolescence can predict depression, suicidal tendencies, drug addiction, and anxiety problems. This hypothesis was derived by Straus and Kantor (1994), from a study that collected data from 2,149 families participating in a national family violence survey. The survey measured corporal punishment and severity of corporal punishment, along with depressive, suicidal, and addictive symptoms.

The relationship between corporal punishment and psychiatric disorders was also studied in 1999 by MacMillan et al. A sample of 9,953 participants of the Ontario Health Supplement were asked questions of about being "hit" or

"slapped" during childhood. A subgroup of 4,888 of these participants reported never been hit and were used to compare the relationship of corporal punishment and four kinds of psychiatric disorders. Psychiatric evaluations were given to everyone in the study and found that those who experienced the most corporal punishment had the highest rates of anxiety and addictive disorders than those who were never spanked. This linear association between corporal punishment and psychiatric disorders gives opponents of corporal punishment even more ground to stand on.

One final aspect of corporal punishment that has not been mentioned is the possibility of it causing negative effects on the relationship between parent and child. Some parents do not use corporal punishment because they believe it would cause parental guilt and take away from the respect between child and parent (Holden et al., 1999). It is common knowledge that the respect between a parent and child is crucial for the positive development of a child. Some professionals reason that if the child sees being spanked as something a parent does that is bad, then the child could come to see the parent as bad (McCord, 1998). Evidence suggests that parents who use harsh corporal punishment will have more problematic children who act against their parents (Fry, 1993). Naturally, these two situations may create an ongoing struggle between the parent and child,

misbehavior would increase and the relationship would deteriorate.

These arguments against the use of corporal punishment are continually being announced to the public. Advocates for banning the use of corporal punishment feel that more effective parenting can be done through reasoning and non-abusive punishment.

Arguments for Corporal Punishment

Professionals who believe in corporal punishment do not argue that effective parenting can not be done through reasoning and non-abusive punishment. They also do not argue that too much corporal punishment does not hinder child development. In order to do this; they must find the point between when it is effective and when it is destructive. By doing so, people who believe in corporal punishment will be able to outline the best way to effectively use corporal punishment without harming the child.

Rhoner and Bourque (1996) attempt to justify how much corporal punishment it takes to hinder the development of a child. They used 281 elementary school children in southern Georgia, where corporal punishment is widely used, to assess how the children perceived themselves in the eyes of their caretakers. A Parental Acceptance-Rejection/Control Questionnaire (Rhoner, 1991) was used to find out how much each

child felt rejected by his/her parent. Also, a very detailed Physical Punishment Questionnaire (Rhoner, 1995) asked the children things like frequency, severity, and timing of when they were spanked. A Family Information Sheet (Rhoner, 1991) was also used to learn about the family structure and background of each child. Finally, the children answered a Personality Assessment Questionnaire (Rhoner, 1991) that reported their psychological adjustment using 42 items expected to be related to caretaker acceptance-rejection. The conclusions supported the idea that a fair amount of corporal punishment does not effect the adjustment of children. Children with natural psychological adjustment were reported as having a light spanking less than once a week. With this information, it may be easier to describe when and how to use corporal punishment.

David Benatar (1998) outlines five reasons as to how and why corporal punishment should be used. The first is that corporal punishment should only be used infrequently and should never cause any injury to the child. Also, the disbursement of corporal punishment should not discriminate between boys and girls. Many times, boys are subjected to much more physical punishment than girls. Next, it is important for due process to ensure that only the guilty are punished and that the punishment is proportional to the offense. The timing of the punishment is also important. Young children may need to be punished as they

are committing the offense so that they know the behavior is wrong. If punishment takes place too long afterwards, they may not be able to link their behavior to the punishment. Finally, Benatar believes in the implementation of safeguards so the infliction of corporal punishment is consistent. With safeguards, children are only spanked under certain rules and conditions. In considering these aspects of inflicting corporal punishment, parents can reduce the chances of causing any psychological damage to their children.

In support of corporal punishment, advocates feel it is necessary to question the paternal instinct of spanking. Do parents actually believe in spanking or do they do it mostly out of conformity or impulse? A study by Socolar and Stein (1995) questioned 204 mothers of children ages one to four about their feelings on corporal punishment. The mothers went through four phases of questioning. The first phase helped measure a general belief in spanking and the second phase compiled beliefs about spanking at different ages and different degrees of severity. The third and fourth phases were used to determine what outside influences might effect the mothers' belief in spanking and to determine the frequency of using corporal punishment.

The results show that mothers who use corporal punishment do it mainly out of belief rather than impulse. Belief, instead of anger, was highly correlated with the practice of corporal

punishment and suggests that mothers actually believe in the use of spanking. It may be difficult for professionals against corporal punishment to argue with maternal instinct.

There is some argument that studies against corporal punishment have methodological problems that take away from their conclusions (Rhoner & Bourque, 1996). For example, some studies have concluded that corporal punishment causes aggression and violence (Straus, 1977, 1991). But, when Baumrind (1994) studied the use of corporal punishment within a loving family, she found no traces of increased aggression. Similarly, Agnew (1983) studied the effectiveness of corporal punishment when used with very consistent demands and found it to be significantly effective. Corporal punishment was only ineffective when the demands placed on the children were inconsistent. These critics of research aimed against corporal punishment have a valid point. It is difficult to control all of the factors contributing to things like aggression and delinquency.

Conclusion

Even though claims that corporal punishment should be outlawed may seem somewhat extreme, activists are only looking out for the best interest of the children and society. It is a good thing to live in a country that protects people's rights and strives for the betterment of the population. Without this

quality, it would be difficult for us to make progress. However, sometimes there is a better answer to a difficult debate than stating that one side is totally right and the other side is totally wrong. Instead of arguing that all corporal punishment is wrong and parents should never spank their children, there may be some in between ground where a reasonable conclusion can be made. If there was a way to define "excessive corporal punishment" in a court of law, then it would be possible to outlaw only the worst kind of corporal punishment. Advocates for the appropriate use of corporal punishment as well as critics of corporal punishment would appreciate such a law. But, "excessive corporal punishment" is a difficult phrase to define without stepping on parental rights or confusing it with child abuse.

There is too much conflicting evidence to totally outlaw corporal punishment and take away a parent's right to spank his/her child. But, there is plenty of evidence, agreed upon by both sides of the debate, suggesting that some forms of corporal punishment are inappropriate and should not be used to discipline children (Benatar, 1998). For this reason, it is important for professionals to educate parents on when and how corporal punishment can be used most effectively. Professionals both for and against corporal punishment would most likely agree

that this would help reduce some of the negative effects inappropriate use of corporal punishment can have.

Brenner, Nicholson, and Fox (1999) describe a study done on the effectiveness of a cognitive-behavioral parenting program used with 91 mothers of children ages 1-5. The program was specifically designed to better educate parents on ways to discipline their children. The results showed a significant decrease in verbal and corporal punishment after the parents completed the program. As a result, significant parental nurturing increased and child misbehavior decreased. This is a good example of how parenting programs can be effective.

The study just described explains that a decrease in corporal punishment led to an increase in nurturing and a decrease in misbehavior. It is important for advocates against corporal punishment to understand that there are more aspects of bad parenting to consider than just corporal punishment. Everything a parent does contributes to the development of the child. Even if a mother does not use corporal punishment, but she totally neglects the child, the result will most likely hinder the child's development in the same fashion as using inappropriate corporal punishment.

It is no coincidence that parents who use too much corporal punishment are less nurturing and less involved in the lives of their children. Likewise, parents who are more

involved and more nurturing do not create negative side effects when they use corporal punishment. This means that a lack of support and involvement by parents is more detrimental to child development than corporal punishment (Simons & Johnson, 1994). This is why educational programs are so productive. The most effective parents sometimes seem to be the ones who understand children the most. Parental education will help parents better understand their children and teach them that everything they do, or do not do, has an effect on who their children will become.

Even as popular opinion sways against its use, corporal punishment continues to affect about 90 percent of the United States population (Rhoner & Bourque, 1996). Although the use of corporal punishment can not be totally to blame for maladjustment, inappropriate use of corporal punishment has given the act a bad reputation. A vital step to help ease the tension of this debate is to encourage more parents to participate in parenting classes and teach them how to use corporal punishment most effectively. This would lessen the burden being put on those parents who do use appropriate corporal punishment and it may have a positive influence on future generations.

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